

Canada Bill by Allan Pinkerton

THERE are some men who naturally choose, or, through a series of unfortunate blunders, drift into the life of social outlaws, who possess so many remarkably original traits of character that they become rather subjects for admiration than condemnation when we review their life and career.

On first thought it could hardly be imagined that one who has been all his life, so far as is known, a gambler and a confidence man, whose associates were always of the same or worse class than himself, who had no more regard for law than a wild Indian, and who never in his entire career seemed to have an aspiration above being the vagabond, par excellence, could move us to anything beyond a passing interest, the same as we would have for a wild animal or any unusual character among men and women.

But here is a man who, from his daring, his genuine simplicity, his great aptitude for his nefarious work, his simple, almost childish ways, his unequaled success, and a hundred other marked and remarkable qualities, cannot but cause something more than a common interest, and must always remain as an extraordinarily brilliant type of a very dangerous and unworthy class.

Such was "Canada Bill," whose real name was William Jones. He was born in a little tent under the trees of Yorkshire, in old England. His people were genuine Gypsies, who lived, as all other Gypsies do, by tinkering, dickering, or fortune-telling, and horse-trading. Bill, as he was always called, grew up among the *Romany* like any other Gypsy lad, becoming proficient in the nameless and numberless tricks of the Gypsy life, and particularly adept at handling cards. In fact, this proficiency caused him finally to leave his tribe, as, wherever he went among them, he never failed to beat the shrewdest of his shrewd people on every occasion where it was possible for him to secure an opponent willing to risk any money upon his supposed superiority in that direction.

Having become altogether too keen for his Gypsy friends, he began appearing at fairs and traveling with provincial catchpenny shows in England. Tiring of successes in that field, he eventually came to America, and wandered about Canada for some time in the genuine Gypsy fashion. This was about twenty-five years ago, when Bill was twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, and when thimble-rigging was the great game at the fairs and among travelers.

Bill soon developed a great reputation for playing short-card games, but finally devoted his talents entirely to three-card monte under the guise of a countryman, and may be said to have been the genuine original of that poor, simple personage who *had* been swindled by sharpers, and who, while bewailing his loss and showing interested people the manner in which he had been robbed, invariably made their natural curiosity and patronizing sympathy cost them dearly.

Himself and another well-known monte-player, named Dick Cady, traveled through Canada for several years, gaining a great notoriety among gamblers and sporting men; and it was here that this singular person secured the *sobriquet* of "Canada Bill," which name clung to him until his

death, in the summer of 1877; and he was known by everybody throughout the country who knew him at all by that name, it being generally supposed that he was of Canadian birth.

As a rule, three-card monte men are among the most godless, worthless, unprincipled villains that infest society anywhere; but this strange character, from his simplicity, which was genuine, his cunning, which was most brilliant, his acting, which was inimitable, because it was nature itself, created a lofty niche for himself in all the honor there may be attached to a brilliant and wholly original career as a sharper of this kind; and however many imitators he may have—and he has hundreds—none can ever approach his perfection in the slightest possible degree.

Any deft person, after a certain amount of practice, can do all the trickery there is about the sleight-of-hand in three-card monte; but the game is so common a dodge among swindlers, that unless the *confidence* of the dupe is first fully secured, he seldom bites at the bait offered.

This must either be confidence, on the part of the person being operated on, that he is smarter than the dealer, if his real character is known; or, in case it is not known, a conviction that he is a genuine greenhorn who can easily be beaten the second time.

It was here that Canada Bill's peculiar genius never failed to give him victory; and it is said of him that he never made a mistake and never failed to win money whenever he attempted it.

His personal appearance, which was most ludicrous, undeniably had much to do with his success. He was the veritable country gawky, the ridiculous, ignorant, absurd creature that has been so imperfectly imitated on and off the stage for years, and whose true description can scarcely be written. He was fully six feet high, with dark eyes and hair, and always had a smooth-shaven face, full of seams and wrinkles, that were put to all manner of difficult expressions with a marvelous facility and ease. All this—coupled with long, loose-jointed arms, long, thin, and apparently a trifle unsteady legs, a shambling, shuffling, awkward gait, and this remarkable face and head bent forward and turned a little to one side, like an inquiring and wise old owl, and then an outfit of Granger clothing, the entire cost of which never exceeded fifteen dollars—made a combination that never failed to call a smile to a stranger's face, or awaken a feeling of curiosity and interest wherever he might be seen.

One striking difference between Canada Bill and all the other sharpers of his ilk lay in the fact that he *was* the thing he seemed to be. Old gamblers and sporting-men could never fathom him. He was an enigma to his closest friends. A short study of the awkward, ambling fellow would give one the impression that he was simply supremely clever in his manner and make up; that he was merely one of the most accomplished actors in his profession ever known; and that he only kept up this *appearance* of guilelessness for the purpose of acquiring greater reputation among his fellows. But those who knew him, as far as it was possible to know the wandering vagabond that he was, assert that he was the most unaffected, innocent, and really simple-hearted of human beings, and never had been anything, and never could have been anything, save just what he was.

This would hardly seem possible of even an exceptional person among ordinary people, and I can only reconcile this singular case with consistency when I call to mind many of the interesting

old Gypsy tinkers I have myself known, who, with all their wise lore and cunning tricks were the merriest, kindest-hearted, jolliest, and most child-like simple dogs on earth.

It seems almost impossible that any living person waging such a relentless war against society as Canada Bill did, until the day of his death, could have anything generous and simple about him; but he certainly had those two qualities to a remarkable degree. They were uppermost in everything that he did. It almost seemed that this man had no thought but that his vocation in life was of the highest respectability; that skinning a man out of a thousand dollars as neatly as he could do it was an admirable stroke of business, even if it led to that man's ruin; and that every act of his criminal life was one of the most honorable accomplishments; so that this sunny temper and honest face was an outgrowth of a satisfaction in upright living.

He was certainly different from all other men whom I have been called upon to study. He always had a mellow and old look about him that at once won the looker-on and caused a real touch of warmth and kindness toward him. His face was always beaming with a rough good-fellowship and a sturdy friendliness that seemed almost something to cling to and bet on, while every movement of his slouchy, unkempt body was only a new indication of his rustic ingenuousness.

One November night, several years since, I started on a hurried trip over the Pittsburg and Fort Wayne road from Chicago to the East, for the transaction of some important business of such a nature that I did not desire the fact of my presence known there; and, noticing several eastern and western people of my acquaintance in the sleeper and throughout the cars, before the train started, I quietly entered the smoking car, and took a cigar and a seat in a quiet corner, with the object of avoiding my friends as much as possible, and remaining where I was until everything had got quiet in the sleeper for the night, so that I could safely retire without observation.

Being very tired, after a casual glance at several other persons in front of me in the car, I settled myself snugly in my seat, hoping to be able to get a little nap; but I had scarcely got myself comfortably arranged, when the train halted at Twenty-second Street, and my attention was attracted by the entrance into our car of a tall, stumbling fellow, dressed in some cheap, woolen, home-spun stuff, that hung about his attenuated frame like a dirty camp-meeting tent around a straggling set of poles.

Pausing just inside the door for a moment, he deposited on the floor a valise whose size and cavernous appearance would have won the heart of an audience at a minstrel show, and then, giving his big hand a great ungainly wave as if to clear away the smoke immediately in front of him, peered into the murky distance, and ejaculated, "Gaul-darned thick!"

He probably referred to both the smoke and the passengers. In any event, he sat clumsily down upon the stove, from which he suddenly bounded like a rubber ball, although there was no fire within it. It appeared as though it had crept into his bucolic mind that he was sitting on a stove, and that there *must*, of course, be a fire within it, and, consequently, he *must* be burned. Whatever impelled him, he and his cavernous valise went *ricocheting* along the aisle, finally coming up short, like a "bucking" mule, at about the center of the car, and there, tumbling noisily into a seat, which, taking into consideration the crowded condition of the coach, singularly enough was vacant.

By this time there was a broad smile on the faces of all the passengers, and many mirthful references were made in an undertone to the wild “Hoosier,” some of which he evidently overheard, but which were received in the best of humor, the subject of such witticism turning a benign and smiling farmer face upon all, but holding on to his big, though evidently nearly empty valise with both hands, as if indicating that he was quite ready for any good-natured joke with “the boys,” so long as none of them attempted any sharp city tricks upon him, which, it could be easily seen from his manner, he had already experienced, as he thought, and was quite ready to have it generally known that quite a mistake would be made when anybody took him for a “young man from the country.”

After the Twenty-second Street crossing was passed, we sped along rapidly, almost the majority of the car seeming to be of that very common class of travelers that are usually considered “good fellows,” who were ready for jest, whether it were ordinary or of the first class.

We had been bowling along for but a short time, however, before the conductor made his appearance.

His was mere business—to collect fares; that was all. He came through the car like an “old campaigner,” with no favors to ask and none to give.

He got along to where our bucolic friend was sitting without trouble, when that lively individual seemed ready for an argument.

“You’re the conductor?” he remarked dryly.

“Yes.”

“You takes the money for ridin’ on this machine?”

“Yes; where ye goin’?”

“Fort Wayne, God willin’.”

The countryman clumsily produced a bill from out a huge roll, and then remarked:

“Lots of good boys on the train?”

“Dunno; guess so,” replied the conductor. The conductor gave the innocent party his change, when that ubiquitous individual remarked:

“Lots of funny fellows on this train?”

The conductor had passed, but he took the time to turn and say:

“Don’t trust ’em, my Granger friend.”

“D—d if I will,” said he, as he took a stronger and firmer hold of his priceless “grib-sack.” “D—d if I will, fur I’ve been thar! I’ve been thar!”

A roar of laughter followed this sally from the “Injeanny Granger,” and I noticed at the time, without giving it any particular attention so far as this countryman and his immediate remarks were concerned, that, at various intervals throughout the car, the laughing which followed his remark was extremely well distributed; but being tired, I received all this merriment as a common occurrence, and, after the conductor passed, fell into a heavy drowse, in which tall Indiana Grangers, brusque conductors, commercial travelers, and the ordinary railroad riffraff danced back and forth through my disturbed dreams.

I was of course unconscious of what passed for a little time, but was eventually disturbed by renewed laughter through the car, and noticed that quite a group had gathered around the Granger, whose members were evidently greatly interested in whatever he was doing and saying; while his great, honest face, all alive with enthusiasm, was wreathed with smiles at being such an object of general interest.

As before stated, up to this time I had given the matter no thought; but when I now heard one of a couple in front of me remark: “Very quaint character; very quaint character. I believe some of those Chicago rascals have victimized him, and he is telling the passengers about it,” which was followed by a request to his companion to “come along and see the fun,” I immediately understood that we were to be given an exhibition of three-card monte of a very interesting character, and that many of the persons in the car were “cappers,” or those members of the gang who are used to persuade fools to bet upon the game.

My first impulse was to put a stop to the villainy at any personal risk; but I recollected that the very reason which had forced me to take up with the discomforts of the smoking-car—an absolute necessity for remaining unknown prevented this, and though my blood boiled with a desire to frustrate the already ripened and charmingly-working plans of the keen scamps, I was forced to swallow my indignation and content myself with taking up a position where I could get a comprehensive idea of what might follow.

By this time so much interest was being exhibited in the uncouth fellow’s manipulations, that two seats had been given him; and there he sat in one corner of the space thus made, with his legs crossed under him like a tailor’s, his huge valise lying across this framework in such a manner that a most neat, level, and glossy surface was made, and all this with a nicety of calculation really remarkable, while his whole form, manner, and action showed him to be the simplest, most honest of men, who, out of the pure goodness of his heart,—rough, ignorant, and unkempt as he was,—proposed giving the crowd about him his experiences merely for what benefit it would certainly prove to them.

“Yaas,” he said in an indescribably droll tone of voice, “yaas, them dogoned Chicago skimmers cum nigh a ruinin’ me. Now, I do ’low them fellers beat the hull tarnal kentry. But gosh! I found ’em out!”

Here the Hoosier laughed with such a ridiculously childish air of triumph, that general laughter was irresistible.

He then reached his long, skinny fingers down into his huge valise and brought out a handful of articles of various kinds, among which were a couple of sickle-teeth, tied together with a string, a horn husking-pin, and a “snack” of chicken covered with bread-crumbs. These caused another laugh, but were suddenly returned to their resting-place and several other dives made into the greasy cavern, evidently to the great discomfiture of the gawky; but he chattered and grinned away, until finally a brand-new pack of cards had been secured.

This was bunglingly opened, the greater portion of the cards slushing out of his hands upon the floor and flying in different directions upon the seat.

To any casual observer it was more than apparent that the poor silly fellow was not more than half-witted, and the fun of it all seemed to lie in his sincerity, which the passengers took for one of the hugest of jokes.

After things had been got to rights—which took the clumsy fellow a long time, during which he enlivened his listeners with his idea of Chicago as a city, its people as sharpers of the first order, and the grandeur of his own great State, Indiana—he selected three cards from the pack, and, wrapping the balance in a dirty bit of brown paper, put them away carefully in the valise.

The three cards selected were the five of spades, the five of clubs, and the queen of hearts, and the gentleman from Indiana now began his exposition in real earnest.

“Wy, d’ye know, the durn skunks said they knowed me, ’n’ ’fore I knowed what I was a doin’ these old friends, as they said they wus, had me bettin’ that I could jerk up the joker. Now, yer see, fellers,” remarked the dealer, as he held up the queen, “they called this keerd the joker, fur why I can’t tell yer, lest it’s a joke on the dealer if yer picks it up.”

“Of course *you* picked it up.” remarked a flashy gentleman, who had the appearance of a successful commercial traveler on a good salary.

Such a look as the dealer gave the man.

“Picked it up!—picked it up? My friend, mebbly you think you’re smart enough to pick it up! Don’t you ever squander yer money like I did a-tryin’! Pick her up! Pick up hell! ’Tain’t in her to git picked up. She can’t be got. Them cussed coons has worked some all- fired charm on that durned keerd, so that no man can raise her. Mebbly you kin lift the keerd? She allers wins, she does; but don’t bet nuthin’.”

Here the dealer bunglingly shuffled the cards, and made such a mess of it that the effort only brought forth more peals of derisive laughter.

“Now, ye see, fellers,” pursued the imperturbable dealer, “this is the five uv spades, hy’r is the five uv clubs, and thar is the rip-roarin’ female that wins everytime she kin be got. I’m jest a-

goin' to skin the boys down hum in Kos-cus-ky County; fur it's the beautifulest and deceivenst game out; but," he added, with the solemnity of a parson at a funeral, "fellers, d'ye know I wouldn't hev a friend o' mine bet on this yer game fur anything—not fur a good boss!"

He closed this admonitory remark with such a droll wave of his long arm and hand, that a palpable snicker greeted the performance; and the flashy gentleman who had suggested that the greeny must have been able to pick up the card when being entertained by his Chicago friends, bent forward, and after a moment's hesitation over the three cards, which were lying face downward upon the valise, picked up one, which, with an air of triumph, he held aloft for a moment and then slapped down with a great flourish.

This was the "rip-roarin' female that wins every time!" and his honor, the gentleman from Kosciusco County, Indiana, turned white as he observed how neatly her ladyship could be brought to the surface by one of a miscellaneous crowd.

"Jehosiphat!" he exclaimed, as he grabbed the cards and began another bungling shuffle of them—"Jehosiphat! Stranger, d'yer know I've got pea-green scrip in my pocket as says as yer can't do that agin?"

"Oh, I wouldn't take your money!" the flashy man replied, as he nudged a man near him. "'T wouldn't be fair, you know."

"Now—now, see hy'r, stranger," answered the Indianian, "I've told ye already that ye hadn't ought to bet on this deceitful game; but yer is too sassy and bold. Yer thinks yer knows it all, 'n' yer doesn't. Jist wait till I fix the keerds. Thar now! Old Injeanny agin the field!"

The dealer had rearranged the cards in a reckless, wild fashion; but there they lay, and the passengers crowded closer and closer about the group to see all the fun that might happen.

Slowly and ungainly enough the dealer reached down into the outside pockets of his homespun suit with both hands. Finding nothing there, he tremulously went into his pantaloons pockets; but he found nothing there.

"Oh, he's a fraud!" suggested a big-bellied man near me, turning to a rural-looking fellow at his side. "Do you know," he continued warmly, "you and I could go in together, and clean that 'old Jasey' out—if he's got any money. But," he added, confidentially, to his companion, "I don't believe he's got a copper; and I wouldn't be surprised if he passed around his hat, begging for car-fare, or lodging, or for his supper-bill, or something of that sort, before he leaves the train. Oh, I've seen too much of that sort of thing, *I* have!"

His companion, whom I had already taken for a country merchant, or something of that kind, as he afterward proved to be, looked nervous, and only replied:

"Wait a bit; let's see what he can find in his clothes. Perhaps these gentlemen wouldn't let us win anything anyhow."

I did not catch the answer, only observing that a pretty good understanding had been arrived at between the two. The party from Indiana by this time, after going through nearly every pocket in his clothing, had brought out from an inside vest-pocket a great, rough, dirty-looking wallet that contained, as could be seen at a glance, a very large though loosely arranged package of greenbacks, which he had denominated “pea-green scrip,” and which he shook out into his broad-rimmed hat at his side in an alarmingly careless way.

“Thar’s what I got left, after comin’ outn’ that d—d Gomorer, Chicager!” the dealer said feelingly. “Stock’s down, ’n’ grass is dry, but I’ll be gol-walloped ef I don’t believe for a hundred-dollar pictur the female boss can’t be lifted agin!”

“I’m your sweet potato—just for once, mind you, just for once, for I ain’t a betting man. But I’ll risk that much just to show you how easily you can be beat at your own game!” remarked the flashy man, carelessly, at the same time covering the hundred-dollar “pictur” with ten ten-dollar bills.

“Can’t I go halves on that?” eagerly asked a rough-looking fellow, who stood on a seat peering over the heads of the passengers, and at the same time holding up a fifty-dollar bill.

I saw that the scheme for getting outside parties to bet, and divide chances with those who considered themselves “up to the game,” was being given a fine impetus.

“Well, I don’t mind, although I’m sure of the whole,” said the flashy party, as he received the fifty dollars nonchalantly.

The honest Granger from Indiana looked dumbfounded at this new evidence of a want of confidence in his ability, but spoke up cheerily: “Wall, thar’s the keerds; yer kin take yer pick!”

Upon this the flashy party pushed his way into the open space, sat down opposite the dealer, and, without any further ado, reached forward with one hand and turned the queen in a twinkling, and raked in the money with the other, immediately rising and handing the party who had taken half the bet the one-hundred-dollar bill, and pocketing the ten ten-dollar bills, and then immediately leaving the luckless dealer, to communicate and comment upon his good fortune to his friends throughout the car and tell them how easily the thing was done.

“Gaul darn the keerds, anyhow!” blurted out the dealer; “the hull cussed thing’s gone back on me; but I swon ef I don’t keep the fun a-goin’!”

Several small bets were made by various parties, the winnings being almost equally divided—if anything, outside parties getting the best of what was to be got.

Suddenly there was a movement near me, and I heard the country merchant remark to his friend:

“Well, I’ll go in five hundred with you. Be careful now, be careful!”

Another “capper” in the crowd, having a Jew in tow, now bet a hundred dollars, and won, dividing the winnings with that party, who received his share with rapturous delight; and it could be easily seen he was in a fine condition to be “worked.”

The large man with the country merchant now stopped and turned to his friend, saying in an undertone: “No, you’re a stranger to me, and I’d rather you’d bet the money. We will fix it this way: I’m certain of picking up the card, but I might be mistaken. I’ll make two or three small bets first, or enough, so that I can pick up the card. While I have it in my hand, I’ll turn one corner under, so that the card, after it is dealt, won’t lay down flat. You’ll see it plainly, and you can’t make a mistake. Now, watch things!”

With this fine piece of bait, the corpulent fellow, who was none other than a “capper,” sat down opposite the dealer and made a few small bets. He lost three in quick succession, but on the fourth trial he turned up the queen, and won.

I watched him closely, for I had overheard him state to his dupe that he would mark the card by turning one corner of the same under toward the face. Surely enough, he did so very deftly, and I noticed that the country merchant had also seen the action, for he immediately stepped forward and took the place made vacant for him.

“Careful now!” said the stout man, as they passed each other.

An answering look from the merchant showed that he considered himself up to a thing or two; and, as he seated himself, he inquired of the ignorant dealer if he limited his bets.

“Ye kin jist bet yer hull pile, or a ten-cent pictur, stranger!” replied that worthy, with a silly, childish chuckle, as he tossed the cards back and forth in a seemingly foolishly-reckless way.

The crowd now pressed forward, all interest and attention. There is always an inexpressible fascination about either winning or losing money. The flush of winning communicates itself to every looker-on, while the wild hunger to get back what one has lost has just as firm a hold upon the bystander as the victim; and one feels almost impelled to try his luck, when he sees that the very fates are all against him.

“Two hundred dollars on the queen!” said the country merchant, laying that amount on the old valise. I noticed that a quick look of intelligence passed between the stout man and the Hoosier dealer. The stout fellow was mistaken in his man. He was betting too low. I made up my mind that his look to the dealer expressed all this with the additional advice: “Let him win a little!”

The money was covered, and the merchant’s hands fluttered tremulously over the cards for a moment. But he picked up the queen and won. A buzz of excited comments followed.

“Be ye one o’ them Chicager skimmers?” asked the dealer. “Confound it! I’m a-gittin’ beat right an’ left!”

The merchant was flushed with his winnings. He was evidently flattered by being considered so shrewd as a “Chicago skinner.” Over behind the front ranks of the lookers-on came; a pantomime order from his stout friend, which seemed to me to mean: “Bet heavy while you are in luck.”

“You don’t limit bets?” asked the merchant eagerly.

“Nary time, nary time. Hyr’s a hatful of picturs as backs the winnin’ keerd, which is always the queen.”

“Well, then,” said the dupe with painful slowness, while the corners of his mouth drew down and his lips became colorless, “I’ll bet fifteen hundred dollars I can pick up the queen!”

There laid one of the cards, showing it had been doubled enough to prevent its resting flatly upon the old valise. The merchant counted out the money in a husky voice, making several errors, and being corrected by some of the passengers. The dealer, who might have had just a trace of a glitter in his black, fishy eyes, groped around among his “picturs” and provided an equal amount. Every person in the car bent forward, and in a painful, breathless silence awaited the result.

“Yer pays yer money, ’n’ yer takes yer choice!” remarked the dealer, leaning back in his seat, and whistling as unconcernedly as if at a town-meeting.

The merchant leaned forward. He looked at the cards as though his very soul had leaped into his eyes. He suddenly grasped the card that refused to lie flatly upon the valise, and turned it over.

He had picked up the five of clubs, and had lost!

Something like a moan escaped the poor victim’s lips. My own blood boiled to rescue him from this villainous robbery. I could not do it without jeopardizing far greater interests, but my heart bled for him in his misery.

“I’m a ruined man!” he gasped, and then staggered through the crowd to sink into a vacant seat.

Even then he could not be left alone. His stout friend, the “capper,” sought him out and upbraided him for his foolishness in picking up the wrong card and losing *his* five hundred dollars with his own. He even begged him to try again, and, finding that he had a few hundred dollars left out of what he was going to New York to buy goods with, cursed him because he would not risk that in order to retrieve himself and pay him back his money, which the reader will readily understand already belonged to the honest, simple-hearted Hoosier who was manipulating the cards.

But the game went on. The loss of so great a sum of money put rather a dampener upon it; but the “cappers” came to the rescue with twenty, fifty, and one hundred dollar bets, which were so rapidly won that the Jew was at last “worked” out of six hundred dollars in two quick bets of three hundred each; and amid a great row and racket which he made over his loss, the voice of the brakeman could be heard, crying out:

“Valparaiso! Twenty minutes for supper!”

Not a minute more had passed, and the train had not even come to a halt, when every one of the nefarious gang had disappeared.

The flashy man, with the look of a successful commercial traveler, was gone; the stout man, who had “stood in” with the country merchant, had gone; the party who had entertained the Jew was gone; and the honest, simple, cheery countryman from Kosciusko County, Indiana, with his cavernous valise half full of loose bills, which he had not even taken time to arrange in the old book for carrying in his side-pocket—and who was none other than the notorious “Canada Bill”—was gone. They were all gone, and they had taken from their dupes from eighteen hundred to two thousand dollars.

I could not but pity the poor victims, who were left on the train to brood over their foolishness; but at the same time a sense of justice stole in upon my sympathy. Every one of these dupes had got beaten at his own game. They were just as dishonest as the men who fleeced them. They would not have risked a dollar had they not, one and all, believed that they had the advantage of a poor, foolish fellow. If he *had* been what they believed, and they had won his money, it would have been robbery just as much as it was robbery to take their money as neatly and easily as it was taken.

Just after the close of the war Canada Bill, in company with a river gambler, named George Devol, or “Uncle George,” as he had a fondness for being called, started for the South, and began operating in and about New Orleans. This George Devol was himself a character, as he had once been a station-agent of some railroad in Minnesota, and on being “braced” and beaten out of his own and considerable of the company’s funds, had such an admiration for the manner in which he had been beaten, that he turned out a gambler himself, and became quite well known along the lower Mississippi.

The two men, in company with one Jerry Kendricks, did an immense business in New Orleans, in the city, upon the boats, and on the different railroad lines running out of that place. Here, in New Orleans, Bill was the green, rollicking, back-country planter, and nearly always made his appearance upon a boat or a train as though he had had a narrow escape from a gang of cut-throats, but was in high glee over the fact that they had not stolen quite all of his money, and had left him a fine package of tin-ware, two or three packages of cow-hide shoes, large enough for a Louisiana negro, and a side or two of bacon. Old “Ben” Burnish, a character well known among sporting men in the North, was one of his most accomplished “cappers” during these days, and the gang made vast sums of money.

But finally “Uncle George” Devol hoped to get the best of Bill, he was so careless and really ingenuous among his friends; and, knowing that he carried a twenty-five hundred dollar roll, got a man and arranged things to beat him. Through his wonderful faculty for reading people and character, Bill permitted the play, and when his opponent won, remarked quietly: “George, you sized my pile pretty well, and got things fixed nice. Your friend will find that roll the smallest twenty-five hundred dollar pot he ever grabbed. Good-by, Uncle George!”

Bill having arranged a “road-roll,” or a showy pile of bills of small denomination, was willing to expend that much to ascertain definitely that Devol had played him false, and immediately took leave of him forever.

When the Union and Central Pacific Railroads were in process of construction, this field proved a grand harvest for Canada Bill; and, on leaving the South, where he at one time owned nearly half of a town at the mouth of the Red River, he proceeded to Kansas City, where, with “Dutch Charlie” as principal “pal,” he certainly must have won from a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars.

From Kansas City he went to Omaha, and drifted back and forth between these points for some time, never failing to win money where he attempted, becoming a perfect scourge to the railroad companies and travelers, but, strangely enough, establishing the highest regard among all business men with whom he came in contact, hardly one of whom would not have taken his word for almost any amount of money.

The man did not seem to realize what money was worth, and gave it to anybody that might ask it. It has been related by those who should be capable of judging, that Bill gave away, gambled, or foolishly expended, fully a quarter of a million dollars.

On one occasion, in Omaha, some policemen, having a spite against Bill, arrested him and brought him before a police magistrate. He was fined fifty dollars.

Bill, rising in the box, with one of his most droll and happy expressions of voice and face, asked:

“Jedge, who does the money go to?”

“This class of fines goes to the school fund. Why?” replied the justice.

“Wall, I reckon ef it goes to so good a cause as that, you can chalk her up to a hundred and fifty jedge!” and Bill put down the money and left the court.

But finally his prowess became so great and the winnings of his crowd so large upon the Union Pacific Railroad, that a general order of the strictest terms was issued forbidding any monte-players riding or playing on the trains of the road, and instructing conductors, on peril of dismissal, to eject them from the cars at all risks and with whatever force might be required. It was upon the appearance of this order that Bill wrote—or caused to be written, as he could not write his own name—his noted impudent proposition to the general superintendent of that road, in which he offered the company ten thousand dollars per annum, if he were given the sole right to throw three-card monte on the Union Pacific trains, and making his offer more attractive by pledging his word that he would confine his professional attentions exclusively to Chicago commercial travelers and Methodist preachers.

It is unnecessary to add that Bill’s proposition did not receive the attention which he imagined it deserved.

After this, in 1874, in company with “Jim” Porter and the veteran gambler, “Colonel” Charlie Starr, Canada Bill proceeded to Chicago, where, by means best known to this class, he secured an understanding with the police, and at once opened four “joints,” or playing-places, and soon had half the “bunko” men in Chicago “steering” for him. The following lines, from the Chicago *Tribune*, of August 7, 1874, were in his honor, although his name was not mentioned. They are entitled:

JONES OF KALAMAZOO.

It was an ancient Farmer Man
Who was stopped by one of three.
“By thy black moustache and oroide ring,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?”
“Hail, Mr. Smith; hail, Mr. Smith!
What news from Kankakee?”

Then up and spake the Farmer Man:
“Mistaken ye mote be,
I am not Smith, nor have I kith
Nor kin in Kankakee;
But I till the soil in Kalamazoo
And my name is Jones—John P.”

The Stranger Man apologized:
“I’m sorry that I did
Mistake you, sir, for my friend Smith;
Excuse me!” and he slid.

It was that ancient Farmer Man
Was stopped by the second of three;
“By thy blonde moustache and Alaska pin,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?”
“Why, welcome Jones, of Kalamazoo,
Dost thou remember me?”

“Thou dost not?—not remember Brown?
Strange, strange! but I do thee;
Nor shalt thou quit me till thou drain
A friendly cup with me.
Some news would I of Kalamazoo,
And friends that thereat be!

“The bar-room doors are open wide,
And we must go therein;
A health I claim! come, give it name;

Or whisky, beer, or gin?"
And the Farmer hoar his fingers four
He loyally hoisted in.

Tw'as then the ancient Farmer Man
Beheld a carl* full drunk,
Who at a table in the room,
Had negligently sunk.

His hair was grizzled, beard unshorn,
His eyes were red and blear,
His whole appearance spoke him one
That drives the Texan steer,
And full well grips the blacksnake whips
A merry bull-whacker.

And still he hiccupped, still he reeled,
And muttered, "Woe is me!
For I have lost of dollars a host
A-bucking the paste-boards three;
Yea, *this* is the way them thieves did play
The sinful three-card monte."

And still he shuffled and chuckled eke:
"There's a Jack, a Seven, a Three,
And spotting the Three, the Seven, the Jack,
Them gamblers they plundered me;"
While under, and over, and under again,
He threw the three-card monte.

And youths and men who sat around
Did wagers with him lay;
And which was the Jack, the Seven, the Three,
Infallibly did say,
While he lost his pile with maudlin smile
And muttered, "Thazzer way!"

Who was it then but pseudo Brown
To the Farmer whispered, "See!"
Drunk as a loon this herder of mules
And possessed of much monie.
Others already are in the field,
Why here stand idle we?"

And who was it but the pseudo Brown

* "Carl"—Countryman, greeny.

That betting did begin,
And laid a C with the Texan clown
And eke the same did win,
While nudging Sir Jones of Kalamazoo,
And bidding him "go in!"

But the gentle heart of the guileless Jones
Rebelled against the game;
Quoth he, with a smile, "I'll win his pile,
But will not keep the same,
But will it return with a lecture stern,
And put him thus to shame!"

And lo, the merry bull-whacker
A card did careless spill,
And his nerveless fingers could not grasp
The Seven and Jack until
The pseudo Brown had marked the Three
Plain with his lead-pencil.

Then up and spake the gallant Jones,
"These bills I wager thee,
That I can pick the Trey from out
The shuffled paste-boards three."
And the Texan clown put his money down
And said, "Thou art meat for me!"

Over and under he threw the cards,
Under and over and back;
Jones laid his finger on that one
Scored with a cross so black;
"Tis the Three!" he cried, with honest pride.
But lo! it was the Jack!

* * * * *

At Kalamazoo, a Farmer Man
May at this day be seen,
Who talks of Sodom and Babylon
As one who has therein been,
And frowns at the sight of his lambkins white
When they gambol on the green.

It is estimated that he made fully one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in Chicago; but as he was an inveterate gambler himself, and played into faro banks nearly all he took at monte, he left that city comparatively “broke,” and, in company with “Jim” and Alick Porter, went to Cleveland, where his last active work was done.

Countless instances are related of the shrewdness and success of this strange man. Among his kind he was king and I have only given this sketch of him as illustrative of a striking type of a dangerous class, still powerful and cunning, which the public would do well to avoid in whatever guise they may appear.

Canada Bill, after an unprecedentedly successful career of over twenty years in America, died a pauper—as nearly every one of all the criminal classes do—at the Charity Hospital, in Reading, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1877.

Allan Pinkerton, *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches*. New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1878.

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